

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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P 192122Z MAY 77
FM AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3534
INFO AMCONSUL MONTREAL
ALL OTHER CANADIAN POSTS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 04095

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, CA
SUBJECT: CLARK AND PCS ARE DOWN IN POLLS AND DOWN
GENERALLY

1. SUMMARY: NATIONAL UNITY ISSUE AND ELECTORATE'S PERCEPTION OF PM TRUDEAU AS BEST LEADER OF FEDERALIST FORCES HAS PULLED RUG OUT FROM UNDER PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE (PC) LEADER JOE CLARK, EXPOSING VARIETY OF LATTER'S WEAKNESSES, REAL OR IMAGINED. WITH POLLS OF PAST SEVERAL MONTHS SHOWING LIBERALS LEADING CONSERVATIVES BY SUBSTANTIAL MARGIN AND WITH LEAD LIKELY TO INCREASE, RUMORS OF FALL ELECTION ARE BEING TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY HERE. END SUMMARY.

2. LAST SEVERAL MONTHS POLL RESULTS HAVE PROVIDED TANGIBLE EVIDENCE OF SITUATION WHICH HAD BEEN BECOMING INCREASINGLY EVIDENT HERE SINCE EARLY THIS YEAR. PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE (PC) LEADER JOE CLARK HAS FAILED TO IMPRESS ELECTORATE AS NATIONAL LEADERSHIP FIGURE. DESPITE HIS TIRELESS CAMPAIGNING EFFORTS WITH APPEARANCES AND SPEECHES IN EVERY AREA OF THE COUNTRY, THE VOTERS SIMPLY WON'T TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY.

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3. UNQUESTIONABLY, PARTI QUEBECOIS VICTORY NOV 15 AND PM TRUDEAU'S PREEMPTING LEADERSHIP OF FEDERALIST CAUSE HAVE PULLED RUG OUT FROM UNDER CLARK. TRUDEAU, FOR ALL HIS EARLIER FAILINGS (AND EARLIER POLLS SHOWED THEY WERE PERCEIVED AS MANY) HAS ESTABLISHED HIMSELF IN PUBLIC MIND AS ONLY FEDERAL LEADER WITH THE WHEREWITHAL TO HOLD COUNTRY TOGETHER. TRUDEAU'S NEW PRE-

EMINENCE HAS, IN TURN, EXPOSED CLARK WEAKNESSES WHICH MAY HAVE BEEN PRESENT BEFORE NOV 15, BUT WHICH PUBLIC OVERLOOKED IN GENERAL DISENCHANTMENT WITH TRUDEAU'S HANDLING OF ECONOMY AND OTHER ISSUES. NATIONAL UNITY QUESTION HAS, IN OTHER WORDS, BEEN CATALYST IN EXPOSING VARIETY OF CLARK PROBLEMS, REAL OR IMAGINED.

4. OLD HAND TRUDEAU BATTLING LEVESQUE AND PQ HAS PROVIDED HIGHLY FAVORABLE CONTRAST TO CLARK'S YOUTH AND INEXPERIENCE IN NATIONAL AFFAIRS. CLARK'S SOMBER THREE-PIECE SUITS AND WEIGHTY PRONOUNCEMENTS CANNOT COUNTER-ACT THE BOYISH FACE AND FEELING AMONG ELECTORATE THAT SITUATION TOO SERIOUS TO SEND BOY TO DO MAN'S JOB. FURTHER, THE ELECTORATE APPARENTLY NOW WANTS A SPELL-BINDER OF THE TRUDEAU OR DIEFENBAKER MOLD -- A FIGHTER WITH QUICK MIND AND CUTTING WIT. QUITE POSSIBLY, IT IS TELEVISION WHICH HAS CAUSED THIS SINCE CANADA HAS HAD ITS SHARE OF LACKLUSTRE BUT SUCCESSFUL PRIME MINISTERS OVER PAST SEVERAL DECADES, BEFORE TV INFLUENCE GREW SO STRONG, E.G. MACKENZIE KING, LOUIS ST, LAURENT, AND LESTER PEARSON. WHATEVER THE REASON, JOE CLARK IS BLAND AND THIS HURTS HIM. HIS SPEECHES READ WELL AND CONTAIN MORE HARD SUBSTANCE THAN THE PRESS GIVE CREDIT FOR. BUT THEY LACK PUNCH AND THE CATCHY PHRASE ON WHICH HEADLINES ARE BUILT.

5. EVEN CLARK'S STRONG SUIT AS AN ORGANIZER HAS SUFFERED BADLY OF LATE, IN PART AT LEAST AS RESULT OF SOARING TRUDEAU AND LIBERAL FORTUNES BUILT ON NATIONAL UNITY
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ISSUE. FIRST SIGN OF OUTBREAK OF TRADITIONAL TORY BICKERING CAME WHEN A MAVERICK IN PC CAUCUS CHALLENGED CLARK SUCCESSFULLY FOR RIGHT TO RUN IN REDISTRICTED RIDING INCLUDING CLARK'S HOME TOWN OF HIGH RIVER, ALBERTA. CLARK'S STATED DESIRE TO BE KNOWN AS "THE MAN FROM HIGH RIVER" THUS SUFFERED A JOLT AS DID CLARK'S PRESTIGE GENERALLY. CLAUDE WAGNER, LEADING PC FRANCO-PHONE FROM QUEBEC, GAVE AN EXCELLENT HEALING SPEECH WHEN HE LOST LEADERSHIP TO CLARK ON LAST BALLOT OF PC LEADERSHIP CONVENTION IN FEB 1976. SINCE THEN, HOWEVER, HE HAS BEEN LUKEWARM TEAMPLAYER AT BEST AND LITTLE APPARENT HELP IN QUEBEC. MOST SERIOUS SIGN OF CAUCUS DISUNITY CAME WITH RECENT DEFECTION OF PROMINENT WESTERN TORY JACK HORNER TO LIBERAL PARTY. CUMULATIVE EFFECT OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS IS GROWING FEELING THAT TORY CAUCUS, REASONABLY WELL-BEHAVED UNTIL PUBLIC OPINION POLLING TURNAROUND, IS RETURNING TO ITS PAST HABIT OF INTERNECINE COMBAT WITH PARTY LEADER FREQUENTLY CAUGHT IN CROSS-FIRE.

6. FINALLY, AN APPARENTLY CONCERTED LIBERAL WHISPERING CAMPAIGN SEEMS TO BE FEEDING EFFECTIVELY ON ALL THE ABOVE. SINCE CLARK'S ELECTION AS PC LEADER, LIBERALS HAVE LOST HARDLY AN OPPORTUNITY TO OBSERVE THAT CLARK CONFIDENTIAL IS GENERALLY A LIGHTWEIGHT AND ONE OF LIBERALS' GREATEST ADVANTAGES. LIGHTWEIGHT CHARGE IS UNTRUE, IN EMBASSY VIEW, AND ATTRACTED LITTLE NOTICE WHILE PCS MAINTAINED

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SOLID POLLING LEAD. WITH PCS DOWN IN POLLS, HOWEVER, ONE INCREASINGLY HEARS UNCOMMITTED PICKING UP THE LINE.

7. COMMENT: THE ELECTORAL PICTURE IS NOT TOTALLY BLEAK FOR CLARK. LIBERAL QUIPS TO THE CONTRARY NOTWITHSTANDING, CLARK IS A TOUGH, COOL AND RESOURCEFUL POLITICIAN AND UNLIKELY TO PANIC. HIS ATTRACTIVE AND BRIGHT WIFE WITH YOUNG CHILD ARE STARTING TO GET FAVORABLE MEDIA TREATMENT IN CONTRAST TO THE APPARENTLY DISINTEGRATING MARRIAGE OF THE TRUDEAUS. BUT THE FACT REMAINS THAT TRUDEAU HAS THE NATIONAL UNITY ISSUE ESSENTIALLY TO HIMSELF ON THE FEDERALIST SIDE AND SINCE THE LATITUDE OF RESPONSIBLE, ALTERNATIVE POLICY IS LIMITED, IT IS HARD TO SEE HOW CLARK CAN TAKE AWAY THAT INITIATIVE. BARRING SOME UNFORESEEN EVENT, THEREFORE, IT IS LIKELY THAT LIBERALS AND TRUDEAU WILL MAINTAIN THEIR STRONG POLLING LEAD AND PERHAPS INCREASE IT. RUMORS OF A NATIONAL ELECTION NEXT FALL ARE NOW BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY HERE AND, WITH CLARK'S AND THE PC'S PROBLEMS SO EVIDENT, IT IS NOT HARD TO SEE WHY. ENDERS

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